



If there is any real hope for a transnational sense of the brotherhood of man, it may come from an environmental disaster that makes us feel we're all on the same side, fighting a common foe.

James Fallows  
*The Atlantic*, July 1990

## Forum

### CDC's New Chief

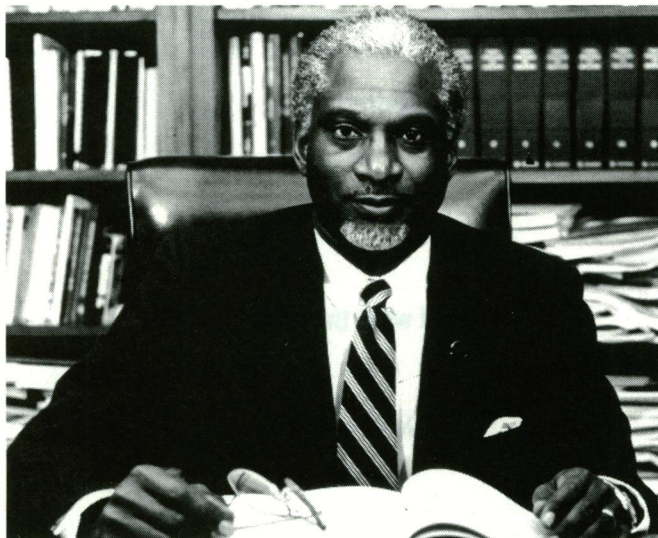
"Ideally suited for the challenges facing CDC in the 1990s," is how Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) has described David Satcher, the new head of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The former president of Meharry Medical College in Nashville took over as director of the nation's primary public health agency in September.

Satcher plans to expand the mission of CDC beyond combatting infectious diseases to include what he considers the major public health threats facing urban American society. In a September interview in the *New York Times*, Satcher said, "I don't think you have to take anything away from CDC's role in order to say that if you look at the major cause of death today it's not smallpox or polio or even infectious diseases. Violence is the leading cause of lost life in this country today. If it's not a public health problem, why are all those people dying from it?"

Although the agency's main concerns in the past have included health risks such as cancer, infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, occupational health and safety problems, and childhood diseases, an identification of violence as a significant public health problem is not entirely new to the CDC. What is new is Satcher's anticipated focus on the problem. One of his goals for the agency is to develop pilot programs to improve inner cities by curbing violence, encouraging optimism in teenagers, and enlisting the help of black churches in disseminating health information to their communities.

Some believe Satcher was chosen for the job, at least in part, because of his strong emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention, which correlates well with the Clinton administration's proposed health plan. Said Satcher, "We have a major problem with immunization in this country; probably less than 50% of the adults are current with tetanus and diptheria boosters. We've got to work on AIDS control. We need to get churches involved in stop-smoking programs and alcohol control programs. I think there's great potential there." Satcher plans to make health promotion and disease prevention the cornerstone of his direction of CDC. Said Satcher, "I think this is an optimal time for more emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention, because I think with health care reform, the appreciation of the role of prevention will be much more important than it has been in the past, and it will be seen more as a part of the health care system. Satcher was a consultant to Hillary Rodham Clinton's task force on health care reform.

Satcher was born in Anniston, Alabama. He received a bachelor of science degree from Morehouse College in Atlanta. He received an MD and PhD in cytogenetics from Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland in 1970. From 1979 to 1982 he served as chairman of the department of community medicine and family practice at Morehouse College School of Medicine. He became president of Meharry Medical College in 1982, where he established an Institute on Health Care for the Poor and Underserved in 1989.



David Satcher—Violence may be our greatest public health threat.

In addition to the 7000-employee CDC, Satcher will oversee the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a component of the Public Health Service within the Department of Health and Human Services.

### Look Ma—No Cancer

A little fluoride in U.S. drinking water is no cause for alarm, a new report says, but research is needed to assess the daily intake of extra fluoride in foods, toothpaste, mouthwash, and other products.

The report, issued by the National Research Council, says lightly fluoridated water does not increase the risk of cancer, kidney failure, bone disease, stomach ailments, infertility, birth defects, or genetic mutations. Thus, the report counters fears raised by a widely publicized 1990 study that equivocally linked intake of heavy fluoride levels with cancer in male rats. Questions remain, however, concerning low-level exposure.

Drinking slightly fluoridated water may cause dental fluorosis, staining and pitting of tooth enamel, in roughly 10% of the population, the NRC report concludes. Children 2-5 years old are particularly susceptible to fluorosis. Yet, the report, prepared by experts representing pathology, dentistry, toxicology, and other specialties, shies away from stating whether mild fluorosis is a health problem or merely a cosmetic annoyance.

As an interim standard, the EPA's current cap of 4 parts per million (ppm) for fluoride in drinking water is appropriate, according to the report, which was sponsored by the EPA. Crippling skeletal fluorosis is known to occur when fluoride levels exceed 8 ppm for many years, and risk of kidney failure may increase at levels in excess of 50 ppm.

Since dental fluorosis has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, the report also calls for increased scrutiny of



fluoride in consumer products. The EPA's fluoride limit should be reevaluated following further study, says Gary M. Whitford, a regents professor at the Medical College of Georgia and member of the report subcommittee.

Today, the Public Health Service recommends fluoride concentrations of 0.7–1.2 ppm (equivalent to 0.35–0.60 milligrams) for U.S. drinking water based on average consumption of 2 liters per day. Americans ingest another 1.2–2.2 milligrams of fluoride daily from dental products and foods processed with fluoridated water, the equivalent of a potential 4.4 additional ppm—more than double the EPA standard. Children are especially likely to swallow toothpaste, and babies drinking powder-and-water formulas may also consume extra fluoride. Still, Whitford cautions, “We’re not talking about scary amounts.”

The NRC report sheds new light on a 1990 study prepared by the National Toxicology Program that found that massive fluoride intake caused bone cancers in some male rats. Study results were negative for female rats as well as all mice, notes Ernest E. McConnell, a toxicology consultant and report subcommittee member. “The NTP study in 1990 raised a little caution flag,” says McConnell. “But a subsequent study sponsored by Procter & Gamble, using a much higher dose, failed to replicate the NTP findings. That’s the thing about little flags. They can go up, or they can come back down, given additional information.”

## Pollution Plagues NAFTA South of the Border

As environmentalists line up to oppose the North American Free Trade Agreement on the grounds that it has the potential to threaten U.S. environmental rules and regulations by exposing them to challenge as trade barriers, some Mexican officials and environmental activists welcome the agreement as a means of encouraging cleanup in that country.

The pact, which contains a supplemental environmental accord intended to ensure enforcement of Mexican environmental and labor standards, has prompted Mexican officials to address the country’s looming environmental problems in an effort to win approval for the agreement. However, Mexico’s pollution problems stem back 40 years, and remedial efforts are hampered by a lack of enforcement, a lack of resources, both financial and technological, and a lack of strong, organized support from government, communities,

## NORTH AMERICAN AGREEMENT ON ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

### Article 5: Government Enforcement Action

1. With the aim of achieving high levels of environmental protection and compliance with its environmental laws and regulations, each Party shall effectively enforce its environmental laws and regulations through appropriate governmental action, subject to Article 37, such as:
  - (a) appointing and training inspectors;
  - (b) monitoring compliance and investigating suspected violations, including thorough on-site inspections;
  - (c) seeking assurances of voluntary compliance and compliance agreements;
  - (d) publicly releasing non-compliance information;
  - (e) issuing bulletins or other periodic statements on enforcement procedures;
  - (f) promoting environmental audits;
  - (g) requiring record keeping and reporting;
  - (h) providing or encouraging mediation and arbitration services;
  - (i) using licenses, permits or authorizations;
  - (j) initiating, in a timely manner, judicial, quasi-judicial or administrative proceedings to seek appropriate sanctions or remedies for violations of its environmental laws and regulations;
  - (k) providing for search, seizure or detention; or
  - (l) issuing administrative orders, including orders of a preventative, curative or emergency nature.
2. Each Party shall ensure that judicial, quasi-judicial or administrative enforcement proceedings are available under its law to sanction or remedy violations of its environmental laws and regulations.
3. Sanctions and remedies provided for a violation of a Party’s environmental laws and regulations shall, as appropriate:
  - (a) take into consideration the nature and gravity of the violation, any economic benefit derived from the violation by the violator, the economic condition of the violator, and other relevant factors; and
  - (b) include compliance agreements, fines, imprisonment, injunctions, the closure of facilities, and the cost of containing or cleaning up pollution.

and businesses operating there.

Mexico’s environmental pollution problems are wide-ranging and persistent—the result of decades of practically unregulated industrialization. Industrial discharges of untreated water into rivers and sewers is common. In Tijuana alone, almost 700 industrial plants operate with little or no official environmental supervision, leaving them free to pollute. Although by law foreign-owned plants are required to ship their hazardous wastes out of Mexico for disposal, in practice widespread waste dumping occurs. A U.S. Congressional study last year found that fewer than one-third of plants report their wastes as required, and the reports that are made are rarely checked. Public disclosure

by companies that pollute is almost unheard of, as are prevention policies to limit the amount of hazardous materials produced and released. There is little incentive for companies to improve environmental conditions, as there is little opposition to practices that threaten the environment and health from a workforce desperate for jobs.

Mexican officials say, however, that change is coming soon, as they pledge millions of dollars to environmental cleanup projects and inspection forces. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has declared that Mexico will not sacrifice environmental health for inclusion in the trade pact and is committed to environmental protection. Sergio Reyes Lujan, director of the National Institute of Ecology, has said, however, “We have just begun to scratch the surface of what needs to be done.”

Although many environmentalists view Mexico’s environmental regulations as good on paper, the major flaw in the system seems to be enforcement. Environmental inspection officers are understaffed, underpaid or not paid at all, and lack equipment and supplies to perform even the most basic sampling and analyses. There have also been charges of corruption.

Recently two inspectors in the Ciudad Juarez office were dismissed after attempting to solicit bribes at a local engine plant.

Nevertheless, supporters of NAFTA hope that its environmental provisions, which invest trination environment and labor commissions with the authority to impose trade sanctions and fines against Mexican violators, will strengthen Mexico’s enforcement practices. Others worry that these provisions are only paper tigers as the penalties may only be used as a last resort and only after a potentially long and complicated arbitration process.

## Feds to Clean up Their Acts

Calling for the federal government to take the lead in cleaning up the environment, President Clinton signed a pollution prevention executive order that reduces toxic emissions from federal facilities by half by 1999 and requires these facilities to report to the public any release of toxic pollutants.

“With this executive order the federal facilities will set the example for the rest of the country and become the leader in